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ABSTRACT

In an action research project, four British further education colleges compared mandatory units of three Advanced General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs)--business, art and design, and health and social care--with related General Certificate of Education Advanced Level (GCE A-level) syllabuses. Activities included a detailed comparison of content, recording of the general attributes or characteristics of each qualification, and consideration of the implications of the comparison, including the potential for shared teaching and learning resources and/or the creation or design of common assignments, activities, or modules of learning. Findings indicated that about half the content of the Advanced GNVQ in art and design overlapped significantly with GCE A-level syllabi, demonstrating potential for some co-teaching, sharing of resources, and perhaps a "Y" model, in which students begin with learning modules common to both GNVQs and GCEs and decide later which to pursue. Some overlap was found between all the GNVQ business mandatory units and GCE A-level business studies syllabi and some, though less, overlap with GCE A-level economics. Overlap between the Advanced GNVQ in health and social care and GCE A-levels in sociology, human biology, and psychology was small, although there were high levels of overlap between a few units and these GCE A-levels. (YLB)

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Comparing content in selected GCE A levels and Advanced GNVQs

Introduction

This bulletin reports on an action research project in which four colleges compared mandatory units of three Advanced GNVQs: Business, Art & Design and Health & Social Care with related GCE A-level syllabuses. Figures 1 and 2 demonstrate the two recording frameworks used. Figures 3 and 4 show how the general attributes of the qualifications were compared and Figures 5-7 set out detailed comparisons of content. The participating colleges drew the following general conclusions:

1. About half the content of the Advanced GNVQ in Art & Design overlapped significantly with GCE A-level syllabuses, demonstrating potential for some co-teaching, sharing of resources and perhaps a 'Y' model. Advanced GNVQ units could be used to extend the GCE A level if required.

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2. There is some overlap between all the GNVQ Business mandatory units and GCE A-level Business Studies syllabuses and some, though less, overlap with GCE A-level Economics. The proportion of overlap with AEB GCE A-level Accounts is low.

3. Overlap between the Advanced GNVQ in Health & Social Care and GCE A levels in Sociology, Human Biology and Psychology, is small although there were high levels of overlap between a few units and these GCE A levels.

The context for comparison

GNVQs are now well established in colleges. Each GNVQ covers a broad vocational area rather than preparing students for a specific occupation. Advanced GNVQs are also designed as a progression route to HE and can be taken with other qualifications such as GCE A-level and AS subjects.

Research undertaken jointly by FEDA's predecessor FEU, the Institute of Education and the Nuffield Foundation indicates that GCE A levels are the qualification most frequently taken with Advanced GNVQs. Of Advanced GNVQ applicants to HE in 1993-4, nearly one in three was taking at least one GCE A level.

Although it was intended that Advanced GNVQs could be taken with GCE A/AS levels, the degree of overlap was not identified and the potential for joint delivery was not explored at the design stage. Since it would be inefficient for each school and college to undertake the comparison separately, further national work ought to be undertaken and published. However, colleges may wish to do some limited comparative work of their own as a useful staff development exercise. Advanced GNVQ and GCE A-level teachers can be brought together to explore the potential for collaboration. The section on recording frameworks offers suggestions for this.

Potential benefits of comparison

Educational

Comparisons could lead to the following beneficial outcomes:

- the construction of 'Y' models in which students begin their programmes with learning modules or units common to both qualifications and make decisions later about which to pursue

- students obtaining dual accreditation from a single learning programme

- the use of *contrasting* Advanced GNVQ units and GCE A-level topics/modules to broaden the students' programmes

- the use of *complementary* components of Advanced GNVQ and GCE A levels perhaps pairing a more practical unit with a more theoretical one

- the identification of GCE A-level modules that might enable Advanced GNVQ students to develop their theoretical understanding

The last two points assume that GCE A levels emphasise theory and Advanced GNVQs application of theory. This may not always be true but detailed comparison will help establish this. In fact, colleges in the project were surprised by how much underpinning theory there can be in an Advanced GNVQ and how, sometimes, the GCE A level can be more practical than the Advanced GNVQ.

Management

Potential efficiency gains could include:

- using the same teaching and learning resources, including flexible learning materials
- using the same member of staff to teach on both programmes
- timetabling joint learning and teaching sessions so that Advanced GNVQ and GCE A-level students can be taught together for part of their programme

A NOTE ON FLEXIBILITY

Some colleges are trying to create a more flexible curriculum in order to increase student choice and open a number of programme entry and exit points over the year. Flexibility is assisted by modularising the curriculum, i.e. dividing it into teaching and learning modules.

Terminology can, however, become confusing here since sub-divisions of GNVQ qualifications are called units and those of GCE A levels are called modules.

FEDA generally uses **modularisation** to refer to the organisation of delivery, i.e. the parts of a teaching and learning programme and **unitisation** to refer to the division of qualifications. Occasionally the modules of learning will match the units of a qualification. Where learning programmes are associated with non-unitised qualifications (such as the traditional GCE A level), colleges may find it useful to sub-divide the learning programme into modules of delivery.

This process can be facilitated by a detailed comparison of the content of different qualifications which appear to address the same or a related curriculum area.

Using the recording frameworks

Two recording frameworks for comparing content were devised by the project (see p4). The colleges used them to compare the mandatory units of selected Advanced GNVQs and related GCE A levels.

The project specified that analysis and comparison of the two qualifications be undertaken by a staff team with in-depth understanding and direct teaching experience of the two qualifications being compared. In most cases staff worked in pairs: an Advanced GNVQ and a GCE A-level specialist. In some cases, one or both had experience of teaching on both. The participating colleges were encouraged to have two pairs working in parallel for each comparative study.

Colleges found that the most effective process of comparison took place in stages:

1. Using **Recording Framework 1** (Figure 1), each pair compared the content of the assigned Advanced GNVQs and GCE A levels in detail by taking each Advanced GNVQ unit and comparing it, element by element, with each GCE A-level topic. The degree to which each overlapped was summarised on a four-point scale and recorded. The four-point scale differentiated:

   - high overlap (more than 50%)
   - medium overlap (30%-50%)
   - low overlap (less than 30%) or
   - no overlap

   NB: the project teams found it useful to use A3 copies of the frame to record findings.

2. In addition to a detailed comparison of content, each pairing considered and recorded the general attributes or characteristics of each qualification using **Recording Framework 2** (Figure 2).

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3. Pairs shared their conclusions with other pairs working on the same Advanced GNVQ/GCE A-level pairing. Areas of disagreement were identified and a consensus reached. Sometimes a consensus was not achieved without considerable debate, but the project colleges valued these robust discussions as an important part of th~ process.

4. For each GNVQ/GCE A-level pairing the staff involved went on to consider the implications of the analysis. Such implications included the potential for shared teaching and learning resources and/or the creation or design of common assignments, activities or modules of learning.

FIGURE 1: RECORDING FRAMEWORK 1

Convergence in selected GCE A levels and Advanced GNVQs (Mandatory Units): Content comparison
Recording framework 1

GNVQ ..... GCE A level ..... Board .....

GNVQ Mandatory Units (+ elements)	Commentary on: Breadth	Depth	Level	Nearest A level topic

Assessment of Y model potential plus comment if appropriate
High
Medium
Low

FIGURE 2: RECORDING FRAMEWORK 2

Convergence in selected A levels and Advanced GNVQs (Mandatory Units): General Attributes
Recording framework 2

GNVQ ..... GCE A level ..... Board .....

Spec/Syllabus facets	Commentary on GNVQ	Degree of convergence	Commentary on A level
Learning outcomes, etc.			
Assessment regime			
Performance/grading criteria			
Levels			
Content overlaps			
Skills			
Unit/module: study time			
Teaching style implications			
Practical/applied & academic aspects			

A = clear overlap B = converging C = scope for convergence (insert appropriate letter)

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Content comparison

Comparing content requires more than simply checking titles or topic headings. Other sources such as students' work (e.g. assessment materials or assignments), marking schemes and examiners' reports are needed for a full understanding of the intended breadth and depth of study. Similar headings can disguise sharp differences in content and demands upon students.

In places the practical orientation of GNVQs can benefit from the academic underpinning of GCE A levels, both in clarifying the expected standard of achievement and in helping to improve the level of understanding. In Art & Design, in particular, theoretical underpinning was considered crucial for success in Advanced GNVQ. The two qualifications complemented each other well in this respect. However, it is important to stress that it should not be assumed that Advanced GNVQ units are more practical and GCE A-level topics more theoretical. Inspection of A-level marking schemes is often valuable here.

Identifying the maximum content overlap depends on careful choice of options within GCE A-level syllabuses and investigation of optional and additional units of the GNVQ.

As indicated in Figure 3 problems can arise for co-teaching, even if there is significant content overlap, because study time and teaching and learning methods can vary. These differences are usually a consequence of the contrasting assessment regimes of the two qualifications. Figure 4 summarises key considerations which need to be made when examining convergence potential.

Different levels of specificity of the two qualifications sometimes made convergence difficult to detect. Project staff wondered if inclusion of more precise learning outcomes in GCE A-level syllabuses and of knowledge specifications in Advanced GNVQs, might make it easier to identify overlap. Paradoxically, the project colleges concluded that the greater the level of prescription, the more difficult it was to foster convergence since the scope for manoeuvre was reduced.

FIGURE 3: CONVERGENCE PATTERNS: GENERAL ATTRIBUTES - 3 ADVANCED GNVQS AND GCE A LEVELS

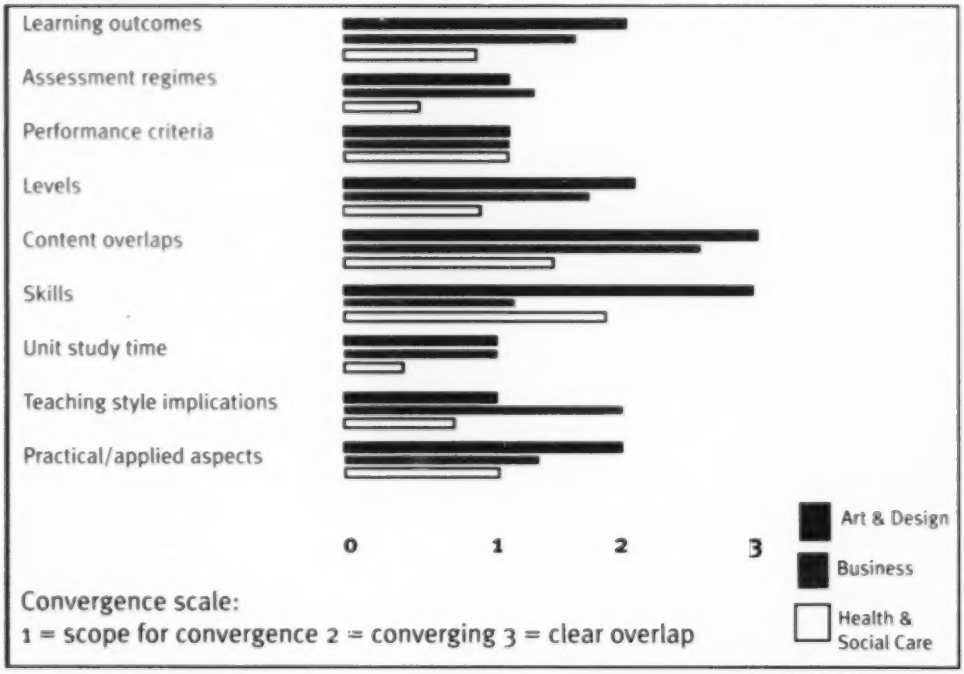

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Figure 4: Convergence of general attributes

The following general attributes were assessed for convergence.	Points for consideration have been expressed as questions to aid clarity.
Attribute	**Considerations**
Learning outcomes	What are the key similarities and differences between the GCE A levels and the Advanced GNVQ, regardless of how learning outcomes are expressed?
Assessment regime	What degree of coincidence is evident between the two regimes? Could they together produce a well-rounded and balanced assessment package? How, if at all, might the requirements of one qualification be used to improve performance on the other?
Performance/grading criteria	Are assessment objectives and criteria clear enough to enable useful comparisons?
Levels	Are the levels of required knowledge and understanding similar? Does the aggregate level reflect accurately the 'level' of the qualification? Are parts of the GCE A-level syllabuses at different 'levels' from the intended Level 3?
Content overlaps	Are there differences in the depth of required study and in the balance between theoretical knowledge, practical and applied aspects? Where the GCE A-level syllabus employs a subject core, what is the degree of overlap with Advanced GNVQ mandatory units? Does flexibility of choice within the GCE A-level syllabus facilitate convergence with the Advanced GNVQ?
Skills	To what extent are general, core and subject-specific skills specified? How are students expected to show their command of them? What is the range of core skills, including IT, in the GCE A levels ?
Unit/module study time	To what extent are common study themes similar/dissimilar in the amount of study time required and in the proportion of the overall assessment structure they represent?
Teaching style implications	How do the qualifications differ in terms of expectations and demands on teaching style/delivery mode?
Practical/applied and academic aspects	To what extent do the qualifications mutually support each other across these different emphases? Do the applied aspects of GNVQs complement the academic character of the A levels?

Assessment regimes and performance criteria

The assessment requirements of Advanced GNVQs contrast strongly with those for GCE A levels. GNVQ assessment requires the student to produce evidence of achievement for every element of units of the GNVQ. The assessment for GCE A levels is carried out through examination and assessment on a sample of the syllabus. There are evident similarities in what students are expected to achieve but the differences in assessment systems mean that the time devoted to the assessment of Advanced GNVQs is far greater than that spent on assessment of GCE A levels.

To pass an Advanced GNVQ, students are required to describe, investigate, and explain as well as offer some evidence of analysis and evaluation. For merit and distinction grades, evidence is required of the ability to plan work, handle information and evaluate outcomes. For GCE A levels the focus of assessment is largely on knowledge and understanding and its application with an emphasis on the higher order skills of analysis, interpretation and evaluation. However, the cognitive skill requirements of the two qualifications are not dissimilar. The multiple assessment opportunities of modular GCE A levels match the Advanced GNVQ assessment requirements more closely.

Colleges concluded:

1. In Art & Design the student centredness of this area provided a unifying bond, the assessment requirements of the two qualifications were highly divergent.
2. In the Health & Social Care area, where GCE A-level and GNVQ assessment methods differ greatly, project colleges felt that some matching of GCE A-level performance criteria and Advanced GNVQ unit tests was still possible and worthwhile. In particular, course work and practical work offered some clear opportunities for exploiting overlap. The practical research required for GCE A-level Psychology and the research unit of Advanced GNVQ Health & Social Care were considered sufficiently close for one assessment to satisfy both qualifications. Common course work in data collection and fieldwork between Health & Social Care and the GCE A-level Sociology is also feasible.
3. The differences in the assessment regimes between Advanced GNVQ and GCE A level were less pronounced in Business Studies than in the other two areas. The assessment objectives within the proposed AEB A-level Business Studies syllabus, when analysed, showed some overlap with Advanced GNVQ requirements. Economics and Accounts syllabuses at GCE A level are best seen as having complementary content and contrasting assessment regimes in comparison to the Advanced GNVQ.

Figures 5-7 illustrate the findings of the project teams which examined content overlap for the three programme areas.

Figure 5: Advanced GNVQ Art & Design

UNITS	CLOSEST GCE A-LEVEL TOPICS (related to nearest GNVQ element where possible)	ULEAC Art & Design+ Critical and Historical Studies Endorsement
3AD1 2-D visual language	1.1 Basic elements – colour, line, contour, shape 1.2 Drawing, painting, printmaking 1.3	●
3AD2 3-D visual language	2.1 3D studies – modelling, carving, construction 2.2 Relationship of materials & techniques to purpose and function 2.3	●
3AD3 Work with technology	3.1 Graphic design and related technology 3.2 Photography, film and video	●
3AD4 Historical and contextual references	4.1 4.2 Critical and historical studies: information gathering and sketch/notebook 4.3	●
3AD5 Business and professional practice	5.1 5.2 5.3	
3AD6 Work to art briefs	6.1 6.2 6.3 6.4	
3AD7 Work to design briefs	7.1 7.2 7.3 7.4	●
3AD8 Evaluate and present work	8.1 8.2 Context and evaluation (but not presentation) 8.3	

The symbols below apply to Figures 5, 6 and 7

Degree of content overlap:

high → c.50% ●

medium → c.30% ●

low → c.15% ●

No symbol = no significant convergence identified

FIGURE 6: ADVANCED GNVQ: BUSINESS

UNITS	CLOSEST GCE A-LEVEL TOPICS (related to nearest GNVQ element where possible)	ULEAC	AEB	AEB	AEB
3B1 Business in the economy	1.1 Marketing/market forces, types of business 1.2 Government economic policy; external influences on business 1.3 Supply and demand	●	●	●	●
3B2 Business systems	2.1 The elements of business activity 2.2 Effective internal and external communications 2.3	●	●		●
3B3 Marketing	3.1 Nature of markets; market research; supply and demand 3.2 Use, preparation and interpretation of business data; planning marketing campaigns 3.3 Marketing decisions; social and ethical considerations	●	●	●	
3B4 Human resources	4.1 Human resources; importance of people achieving objectives; industrial relations; training; terms/conditions of employment; employee protection motivational factors 4.2 Management structures; business organisations 4.3 Recruitment and selection	●	●	●	
3B5 Employment in the market economy	5.1 Employment 5.2 Trade unions; government policy; legal considerations 5.3 Employment	●	●		
3B6 Financial transactions & monitoring	6.1 6.2 6.3 Accounting ratios	●	●	●	
3B7 Financial resources	7.1 Sources of finance; sources of capital/assets; financial information; costs of production; business finance 7.2 Budgetary control; cashflow management 7.3 Costing; fixed and variable expenditure 7.4 Financial statements; profit & loss and balance sheets	●	●	●	●
3B8 Business planning	8.1 Factors of production; break-even point 8.2 Management of business activity; organisational theories; budgetary control 8.3 Marketing as an integrating procedure	●	●	●	●

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Figure 7: Advanced GNVQ Health & Social Care

UNITS	CLOSEST GCE A-LEVEL TOPICS (related to nearest GNVQ element where possible)	AEB (Sociology)	AEB (Human Biology)	AEB (Psychology)
3HSC1 Access, equal opportunities and client rights	1.1 Attitudes; prejudice and discrimination 1.2 Self concept; stratification; health welfare and poverty 1.3	●		●
3HSC2 Interpersonal reaction	2.1 Social perception 2.2 2.3			●
3HSC3 Physical aspects of health	3.1 Structure and physiology of human body - circulatory system, etc; effects of ageing, impairment of functions 3.2 Characteristics of diseases; host-parasite relations; variations in health by class, age, ethnicity and region 3.3 Human food/dietary requirements related to age, pregnancy and occupation			
3HSC4 Psychological and social aspects of Health & Social Care	4.1 Self concept; adolescence, adulthood and senescence; social behaviour; social perception; interpersonal attraction and prejudice; social influence in interaction; social behaviour and individual differences 4.2 Anxiety and stress; impact of critical life events; psychopathology; pro- and anti-social behaviour 4.3 Case-study opportunities following themes in 4.1 and 4.2			
3HSC5 Health Promotion	5.1 5.2 5.3 Amenable to coursework research project	●		
3HSC6 Structure and practices in Health & Social Care	6.1 Health, welfare and poverty: 6.2 Topics within health, welfare 6.3 and poverty amenable to coursework project	●		
3HSC7 Care plans	7.1 Normal and abnormal behaviour 7.2 7.3 7.4	●		●
3HSC8 Research in Health & Social Care	8.1 8.2 Research methods applied through 8.3 course work using primary and secondary data	●		●

Core skills

Although both qualifications develop core skills, the requirements within GNVQs are more formally and closely defined. There is, as yet, no indication of the widespread use of a common set of core skills across qualifications.

The project found that in some subject areas common practical activities could be identified to develop core skills through both qualifications.

Study and teaching time

Because the relative amount of teaching time allocated to the two qualifications at different colleges varied, comparisons of study and teaching time were difficult. Moreover, student timetables for GCE A levels are based on the assumption that students will enter for several subjects. Advanced GNVQ student timetables usually assume that the student will attempt only the GNVQ (with additional units or one other qualification).

Some common timetabling would have to occur to make the best use of overlapping content in co-teaching. One option might be the occasional suspension of the normal timetable to enable joint activities for Advanced GNVQ and GCE A-level students.

If a 'Y' model were to be introduced, a radical rethinking of timetabling might be required. Providing for students who choose the GCE A-level route, after following the common part of the 'Y' model, would be very difficult since the obvious alternative to an Advanced GNVQ is two or three GCE A levels. The student would either have to start one or two GCE A levels late or accept a much increased workload by studying the Advanced GNVQ, its related GCE A-level subject and one or two other GCE A-level subjects alongside it, until a decision is made for one route or the other.

If Advanced GNVQ Science and GCE A-level Science subjects were compared and this revealed considerable overlap, a 'Y' model might be practical. This is because the stem of the 'Y' could include several science subjects. However, it seems likely that students following a 'Y' model would have an increased workload during the stem of the 'Y' or some catching up to do later in their programme.

Implications for teaching styles

GNVQs lend themselves to individualised learning. Although this learning style does occur at GCE A level, much whole-group teaching is still used. The project colleges felt that teaching style was determined mainly by the requirements of the assessment regimes. Therefore the choice of GCE A-level syllabus with which to pair the Advanced GNVQ, is particularly important, as some provide more opportunities for individualised approaches to learning.

Levels and standards

Content differs between an Advanced GNVQ and a GCE A level of the same subject. However, it was always the intention that the level/standard of the two should be the same.

One college found marked variations in level between subject areas. The level of similar content in the Advanced GNVQ Business Studies and a GCE A level in Business Studies seemed close but not the comparable topics in Advanced GNVQ Health & Social Care and GCE A-level Sociology.

Colleges concluded that, overall, the depth of study required for GCE A level was greater than for the Advanced GNVQ and this difference would limit the scope for common teaching unless provision could be made for it. Conversely, one college concluded that the GNVQ method of

study, developed for the Advanced GNVQ in Health & Social Care was more challenging than that associated with the GCE A level. Colleges also recognised that the breadth of study required for Advanced GNVQs was greater than that for GCE A levels and that the need for independent research in GNVQs required higher levels of intellectual ability than some GCE A levels.

Conclusions

Identifying areas of overlap can be a potentially valuable and relatively straightforward exercise but colleges do need to be clear about why they wish to compare Advanced GNVQs and GCE A levels. It can enable teaching resources to be shared. It can also identify complementary and contrasting units of GNVQs to enhance or extend GCE A-level programmes and vice versa. It can lead to joint teaching and help colleges considering 'Y' models.

The degree of overlap found will vary. Advanced GNVQ Health & Social Care has a distinctive content which is not replicated in the GCE A levels. Advanced GNVQ units could therefore be used to extend a GCE A-level programme and vice versa. However other GNVQs, for example in Business, are closer in content to GCE A levels. This increases the possibilities of joint teaching or materials production and delivery, but threatens the distinctiveness of Advanced GNVQs.

It must be remembered that Advanced GNVQs and GCE A levels differ mostly in the ways in which they are structured and assessed, and the complementary features of GNVQs such as core skills, additional and optional units.

Although no project college decided to adopt a 'Y' model, largely because of the problems of time allocation and learning and assessment styles, they did see potential for further collaboration between staff and students. One college planned to suspend both GNVQ and GCE A-level timetables from time to time for joint activities. These would include research projects where GCE A-level students would benefit from working with GNVQ students — who may have better developed skills of independent working. GNVQ students would benefit from working with GCE A-level students who may have more highly developed analytical skills. As before, however, assumptions about the practical vocationalism of Advanced GNVQs and the analytical and theoretical requirements of GCE A level should be treated with caution. These distinctions are not always clear cut.

The work reported in this bulletin has been further explored during the recent Review of 16-19 Qualifications by Sir Ron Dearing. His report affirms the possibility of common units and proposes further work to be undertaken by awarding bodies to identify common content in the design specifications. This will greatly facilitate the approaches described in this report.

The Dearing Report has also proposed a six-unit Advanced GNVQ available in addition to the existing 12-unit Advanced GNVQ. This would make it easier to take an Advanced GNVQ together with GCE A levels and would help facilitate the introduction of 'Y' models and co-teaching, where content and assessment overlapped. Therefore there is a strong case for mapping the content of any future six-unit Advanced GNVQs against complementary GCE A levels before they are introduced.

Some have called for Advanced GNVQs and GCE A levels to be redesigned so that they are more similar than at present. However, if the convergence goes too far, the distinctiveness of GNVQ as a separate qualification would be undermined.

The Dearing Report firmly supports the need to maintain these distinctive parthways and recommends that further work should be undertaken 'without changing the distinctive nature and rigour of each of these qualifications'.

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